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Discrimination in the schools can assume many forms. One kind of prejudice involving the attitudes held toward lower socioeconomic classes may be termed "situational bias." It is defined as an event wherein a person, persons or an agency does not have facilities available to counteract the absence or presence of a quality or attribute which restricts or restrains one's participation in an activity accessible to others not so characterized.

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SITUATIONAL BIAS:

A Special Form of Discrimination

CLINTON A. SNYDER

Discrimination in the schools can take many forms. This article discusses one kind and suggests ways of dealing with it. Mr. Snyder is an assistant professor in the Bureau of Educational Research and Service at The Ohio State University.

THE usual targets for prejudice and discrimination are minority groups—perhaps members of a religious, ethnic, or non-white group. Often overlooked are the quasi-prejudicial attitudes toward other elements of our population, such as the lower socioeconomic classes. This special kind of prejudice, which we shall define later, often results in a great educational loss. The common evaluative measures, such as dropouts, college entrance, job attainment, and even IQ's, all indicate that large numbers of school-age youth do not derive full benefit from their educational experiences.[1] Many of the losses reflected through these measures may well be the result of discrimination in the schools. When a prejudicial attitude is expressed as an overt behavior resulting in detriment to or deprivation of the object of prejudice, this is discrimination.

Prejudice in the School

Let us begin by examining the evidence regarding prejudicial attitudes among teachers and students. There is little direct evidence indicating teachers' levels of prejudice either within their own group or in comparison with other occupational groups. Cook's reporting of the College Study in Intergroup Relations indicates the sensitivity of this area. Although colleges and universities were co-

[1] *See* Patricia Cayo Sexton, *Education and Income: Inequalities of Opportunity in Our Public Schools.* New York: Viking Press, 1961, Chapter 4; Robert J. Havighurst and Bernice L. Neugarten, *Society and Education.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1957, Chapters 10–11; and Allison Davis, *Social Class Influence upon Learning.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948.

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operative in conducting local and idiographic studies, they were very reluctant to use formal, standardized testing instruments which would have provided data useful for comparative analyses of faculty and student attitudes between institutions. In the few instances where it was possible, and this was corroborated by later testing in other situations, it was seen that "*education majors are very weak in knowledge content*" of the "concepts, present status, history, current problems, and proposed solutions" pertinent to the understanding of "race, creed, immigrant peoples, rural-urban, and class-level differences."[2]

Cook's public-school studies are more numerous, perhaps because of larger samplings; but again statistically comparable data were scarce. Nevertheless, "less than a tenth of the schools showed any 'special and serious effort' . . . to solve intergroup problems, and in most cases where such effort had been made, it was by administrative request. Most teachers . . . expressed interest in intergroup study and action, although cases were few . . . where this had led to any specific program"[3]—this despite the fact that scientific evidence has demonstrated that prejudice in our population can be lowered by various techniques used in formal educational programs.[4]

Even indirect evidence provides only tentative indications of the level of prejudice and discrimination among educational personnel. There is an often quoted—but low—inverse relationship between educational level and prejudice.[5] And it seems reasonable that teachers should have a somewhat lower than "average" level of prejudice. The social role of the teacher is one to which we assign responsibility for imbuing our children with many of those values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs that we consider essential for the continuance of the American way of life. This value system proscribes prejudice and discrimination. Not only moral premises, but scientific evidence and legal decisions as well, label such behavior as inappropriate to and dysfunctional for our society. Because of the high visibility of their occupation, teachers would severely jeopardize the security of their position by overt and public displays of prejudice.

What about prejudice among students? Briefly we can say that

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[2] Cook, Lloyd, and Cook, Elaine. *Intergroup Education.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1954, p. 98.

[3] Cook, Lloyd A. *Intergroup Relations in Teacher Education.* Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1951, p. 58.

[4] *See* Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Press, Inc., 1954, Chapter 30.

[5] *See* John Harding, *et al.*, "Prejudice and Ethnic Relations," in *Handbook of Social Psychology,* Gardner Lindzey, editor. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Press, Inc., 1954, 1046–48. *Cf.* Allport, *op. cit.,* 432–34.

children arrive at school with the seeds of prejudice already planted.[6] And, unless there are well-planned programs to combat this tendency, they will exhibit the prejudicial behavior seen all too often in adults.

The Additional Variable of Socioeconomic Class

We should now properly qualify the statement that prejudice and discrimination are seen in the school. The concept of minority group is insufficient to subsume all children who do not realize a maximum, or perhaps even a minimum, reward for their time spent in school. All of the studies noted earlier cite inequities of benefit not only for minority groups, but for social-class groups as well. They document greater over-all success in the educational system as a correlate of the higher social-class position of the child and his parents. With the cumulative effect of lower-class level and minority-group membership (so well described by Warner's concept of the class-caste complex[7]), the educational deprivation of the child becomes even more probable.

The abilities of lower-class children are often displayed in activities external to the culture of the school and thus are not visible in terms of the usual criteria of academic success. We must not underestimate the socially or culturally deprived child simply because his background has not impressed upon him the value of formal education as a means to his future welfare. There is evidence concerning the normal distribution of innate intelligence in any large segment of our society, but examination of the social-class background of children identified by some schools as "gifted" reveals only too well that we do often overlook the lower-class child.[8]

In effect, our educational system may be prejudging the lower-class child. The value orientations and learnings which may be requisite for school success may be nonexistent or irrelevant in his social milieu. Because he lacks these, we may well be misidentifying his capabilities, stereotyping him, and depriving him of his rightful access to the full benefits of public education. Much of this may be the result of the complex structure of the educational system as it

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[6] *See* Marian Radke, Helen G. Trager, and Hadassah Davis, "Social Perceptions and Attitudes of Children," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 1949, *40*, 327–447; Kenneth B. Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955; and Mary Ellen Goodman, *Race Awareness in Young Children*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Press, Inc., 1952. *See also* "The Development of Racial Bias in Young Children," pp. 120–27, in this issue of TIP.

[7] Warner, Lloyd W. "Introduction" in Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941.

[8] Sexton, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

has evolved with the burgeoning enrollments of the past quarter century. It would be a gross and specious malignment to explain such actions as the result of prejudice and discrimination on the part of school personnel. Perhaps a new term is needed—I suggest *situational bias*.

Situational Bias—an Example and a Definition

Let us assume that a young man entering high school is strongly motivated to play football. Perhaps this has been the critical factor preventing his dropping out of school. He tries out for the freshman team and makes it only because its size is not restricted. The following year he is dropped when the team is cut to the size prescribed by conference rules. The coach explains that he is not heavy enough nor muscular enough—in short, that he is unable to protect himself in the physical contacts required by the sport.

This young man comes from a home where severe economic, and perhaps cultural, deprivation exists. If examined by a physician or the school nurse, he would be identified as a malnourished child. His social-class position has prevented his full use of a public-education facility. Another youth coming from a family better able to ensure the physical well-being of their children might not be so restricted.

Obviously, the coach did not discriminate against this youth. His decision was unavoidable and was justified by his concern for the boy's physical welfare. Nevertheless, it did constitute a denial of access and probably was damaging to the young man's psyche.

What occurred here might be described as *situational bias*. This is defined as an event wherein a person, persons, or an agency does not have facilities available to counteract the absence or presence of a quality or attribute which restricts or restrains one's participation in an activity accessible to others not so characterized.

The foregoing example may be an exaggeration. There are many boys who, for one reason or another, are unable to make the team. All such cases constitute biases of varying degrees. To alleviate the situation, the school does provide alternatives. Our youth may play tennis or baseball or go out for a track event, if his initial motivations and aspirations can be transferred.

Physical variations are easily recognized and are now understood as sources for possible situational bias. Today proper scissors and arm chairs are furnished for left-handed children; appropriately scaled furniture is available for the unusually tall or small child.

A more critical and frequent form of situational bias results from the cultural or socioeconomic deprivation of the child. Many behavioral and attitudinal characteristics are produced by something

other than a physiological variation. Disadvantaged children may have a low vocabulary level, but this rarely hinders their communication with their peers—perhaps they know other words? They may lack books and periodicals in their homes, but they do find ways to fill in their time outside of school. They may show little concern for academic achievement, but value other forms of success instead. Note that "deprivation" implies something less than a defined norm. To fill in a particular lack, the school may not only furnish additional learning, but may also need to replace a prior learning.

The school does furnish alternative courses and programs to alleviate situational biases that can operate to the disadvantage of some students. Are the alternatives adequate—of sufficient variety and number to meet particular needs? Does the student have the motivation necessary to receive benefit from such alternatives? Or must motivation be implanted? Are such programs one-way streets that confirm and prolong the existing status of the child? Or are they in a sense remedial and designed to assist his entrance or return to the mainstream of public education? What are the effects of his differential identification and treatment upon his self-image? These questions remain unanswered.

Some Cautions

1. Situational bias must not be used as a rationalization for a default forced upon the school by the exigencies of inadequate tax support or classroom and teacher shortages. In view of our economic problems, the lowered expense and ease of trying to fit all students into a few established molds becomes indeed seductive. But if we do this, we assume both that our molds are correct in shape and size and that all our students can be fitted into them. It is doubtful that these are valid assumptions. The economy of today's conformity provides the basis for tomorrow's losses.

2. Formal programing of tailored assistance is expensive and time-consuming. It must be carefully designed and implemented. That the rewards will be worth the costs can be justified only by expectations for minimizing talent losses and for long-range increases in the productivity of the "average" individual coming from the lower social levels of our society.

3. Whether the school should be an agent of reform and attack social problems at their sources is a matter involving etiological assumptions and reconstructionist values that cannot be discussed here. Certainly our resources can be used to treat the manifest syndrome displayed in the disadvantaged child. We can help him to gain rewarding access to all the educational opportunities we offer.

4. We cannot assume that the child is "ready" for aid. From his first entrance into school, we must recognize his problems and provide him with a value and motivational system that has meaning in terms of his existing orientations. It must not only reinforce his transition into school life, but also increase the likelihood that he will receive greater benefit from the educational opportunities offered him in later years. Dahlke surveys a great deal of evidence indicating that we have not been particularly successful in the past at even recognizing, let alone dealing with, such problems and needs.[9]

5. Finally, if such goals seem too obscure and idealistic, there are concrete actions that can be taken today. Educational curriculums are placing increased emphasis on the social sciences.[10] Factual information in this area will help to sensitize future teachers to the types of problems that have been noted. It should minimize inadequacies or defects in their knowledge that could conceivably lead to the more classic forms of prejudice and discrimination. This emphasis should be continued and increased. For practicing teachers, education has numerous mechanisms that can be of value. In-service training, seminars, extension courses, community study programs, etc., can all aid in improving the insight and understanding of the diverse backgrounds and needs of students. Lest such programs be brusquely dismissed as unnecessary, one might note that Shipley concludes his study of the mentally disturbed teacher by outlining 87 behavioral characteristics valuable for teacher appraisal. The first entry is "I. Attitude Toward Children. 1. bias."[11]

Conclusion—Homogeneity versus Heterogeneity

Many things can be done apart from improving the face-to-face interaction of teacher and student. One example of a bias that should have been corrected and yet evidently has not been, can be seen in elementary-school textbooks. In 1946, evidence was presented by Childs that an unrealistic, idealized, even aberrant, pic-

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[9] Dahlke, H. Otto. *Values in Culture and Classroom: A Study in the Sociology of the School.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958, Chapter 13.

[10] *See* G. K. Hodenfield and T. M. Stinnett, *The Education of Teachers: Conflict and Consensus.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961.

[11] Shipley, Joseph T. *The Mentally Disturbed Teacher.* New York: Chilton Company, 1961, p. 383. Shipley provides evidence that he is not dealing with an insignificantly small part of our educational personnel, as we might wish to assume. In fact, quite the contrary is seen. *See* his Introduction, especially pages 3–7. However, his work should be approached with caution. Since case-study reporting is used, it is difficult to arrive at generalizations of any kind. When other kinds of evidence are cited, there is the equally serious problem of defining operational indicators for neurosis and mental disturbance. If carefully and objectively read, however, the book does provide scathing evidence of the vicious stresses that often impinge upon the teaching position.

ture of social life was being presented to children through the contents of textbooks.[12] Corroboration of ethnocentric contents was offered a few years later by Howard Wilson and his associates.[13] The work of Hilda Taba and her staff in the early fifties resulted in excellent bibliographies for intergroup materials.[14] Yet as recently as this year, Otto Klineberg again presents evidence that the situation has not shown remarkable improvement.[15] Children are still exposed to the picture of American society as a homogeneous, all-white population. Evidently most of us are fair and come from northern European stock. He cites numerous examples of the reinforcement of the image of the "typical" American family as well-off, well-fed, well-adjusted to life, and happy. In short, life is unsullied by the social problems engendered by a highly technologized mass society and frequently evident in the contemporary scene.

Perhaps our unique national character is attributable to the tremendous variety of ethnic backgrounds, occupational interests, religious faiths, educational levels, and even political ideologies seen in our population. These all add up to an equally great variety of value orientations, motivations, interests, and abilities in our children. The interplay and competition between these often opposing forces may be among the factors which have brought us to our fortunate position in the world today. Our educational system must recognize the wealth of differences that characterize our children and must build upon this foundation of diversity. Prejudice, discrimination, and bias, in any form, have no place in our culture today. They are all defective behaviors implementing a single "right" way, a monolithic set of socialization procedures being applied to all. Through them, the way is open only to those who meet the eligibility criteria. We have for years recognized individual psychological differences; perhaps the time has come to work with individual differences of sociocultural origin.

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[12] Child, Irvin L., Potter, Elmer H., and Levine, Estelle M. "Children's Textbooks and Personality Development: An Exploration in the Social Psychology of Education," *Psychological Monographs,* 1946, *60,* No. 3 (Whole No. 279).

[13] Wilson, Howard E. *Intergroup Relations in Teaching Material: A Survey and Appraisal.* Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1949.

[14] Taba, Hilda, *et al.* Several pertinent works published by the American Council on Education, Washington, D. C., might be cited—e.g., *With Focus on Human Relations: A Story of an Eighth Grade* (1950), *Reading Ladders for Human Relations* (1949), *Literature for Human Understanding* (1948), *Curriculum in Intergroup Relations* (1949), *Elementary Curriculum in Intergroup Relations* (1950).

[15] Klineberg, Otto. "Life Is Fun in a Smiling, Fair-Skinned World," *Saturday Review,* February 16, 1963, *46,* 75–77, 87. *See also* "Intergroup Relations in Social-Studies Textbooks," pp. 128–35, in this issue of TIP.